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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question, "What is the relationship of communications--in the sense of technology of information--and community?" The answer is the Internet. Public relations educators must teach students and practitioners how to best use the Internet to enhance public relations community-building. The implications of today's Internet are profound, with its applications enriching not only personal lives but having diverse business applications, not the least of which is public relations and especially public relations community-building. A growing portion of Web traffic comes from its increasing use as a publishing medium. The Internet and the World Wide Web will not only figure prominently in public relations and public relations community-building in the 21st century, it most likely will dominate in these efforts. (Contains 10 references.) (CR)

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NATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

"A REVISITATION OF THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN THE 21ST CENTURY"

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"A REVISITATION OF THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN THE 21ST CENTURY"

INTRODUCTION

Numerous contemporary scholars have called for the restoration of "community" in contemporary society to reduce the anomie, fragmentation and alienation prevalent in post-industrial America. Perhaps best known is the founder of the "communitarian" movement, Amitai Etzioni (1993), who maintains:

> ... (T)o the extent that we have lost community, we need to rebuild it, not only because community life is a major source of satisfaction of our deeper personal needs, but because the social pressures community brings to bear are a mainstay of our moral values. (p. 40)

Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) contended a decade ago that public relations practitioners can do much to ameliorate this loss of community in contemporary society. Specifically, these communication scholars advocated:

1. An appropriate approach to practicing community (and public) relations must be derived through an active attempt to restore and maintain the sense of community that has been lost in contemporary society.

2. Through attempts by the public relations practitioner to help restore and maintain community, many of the community relations problems that practitioners now concern themselves with would not have evolved or would be more easily resolvable.

3. To attempt to do this requires practitioners to view public relations and its function from another perspective. (p. 111)

They offer eight specific recommendations:

1. Practitioners can help community members and the organizations they represent become conscious of common interests that are the basis for both their contentions and their solutions. With conscientious thought, practitioners can help citizens in the community maintain their individuality as well as their solidarity ...

2. Practitioners can help individuals in the community to overcome alienation in its several forms. They can help individuals accommodate themselves to the larger group of the community. Practitioners can help members of the community to know one another. They can help develop person-to-person relationships within the community and help community members share personal experiences among one another in a true spirit of community ...

3. Practitioners can help their organizations assume the role that Dewey reserved for the public schools, that is, in helping to create a sense of community. Application of new communication technologies—together with an appropriate theoretical understanding of their use—is one way that public relations practitioners can help to fulfill such goals ...

4. Leisure time of contemporary society is not well considered by most organizations. Public relations practitioners should be cognizant of this and encourage leisure-time activities of citizens to enhance their sense of community ...

5. Consummatory, that is, self-fulfilling, communication offers an immediate enhancement of life, which can be enjoyed for its own sake. Most practitioners, concerned with persuasion and advocacy, do not encourage such communication; rather, they focus on merely instrumental, or practical, communication ...

6. Practitioners can help individuals find security and protection through association with others. Practitioners can help members of the community develop and fulfull (*sic*) their social roles. Practitioners can lead their organizations in charitable works and concern for people within the community ...

7. Interest in community welfare, social order, and progress can be addressed by public relations practitioners. As a social center, through a concern for art and a concern for community play, the organization can help to enhance community. Practitioners can help the community share aesthetic experience, religious ideas, personal values, and sentiments ...

8. Practitioners can help foster personal friendships. They can help individuals to root themselves in the community, to grow with it, gaining in depth, significance, flavor, and absorbing the local tradition and spirit. (pp. 112-116)

The authors maintained that public relations thus becomes quite straight-forward: it is a role of communication as that concept was used by the Chicago School of Social Thought; also, it is an altruistic function based on a sound and pragmatic philosophy that should result in a more humane and mutually supportive society (p. 117).

These eight recommendations might well be reconsidered in light of contemporary changes in society, specifically in the rapid development of communication technology that has not only accelerated multiculturalism and globalism, but that has dramatically changed the ways people communicate in their daily lives.

Innis argued that changes in communication technology affect culture by altering the structure of things thought about (structure of interests), the things thought with (symbols) and the arena in which thought develops (the nature of community) (Carey, 1989, p. 160). Mowlana (1996) asks a most important question at this time, i.e., "What is the relationship of communications—in the sense of the technology of information—and community?" (p. 90).

To which McLuhan might have responded by reiterating, "The Medium in the Message." McLuhan (1967) observed:

> Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication .... The alphabet and print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, a process of specialism and of detachment. Electric technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement. It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media. (p. 8)

McLuhan didn't live to see today's Internet develop to its present level, or he certainly would have had much to say about a communication phenomenon that may well prove to have as much impact upon society as has the alphabet and Gutenberg's press. Once an obscure mechanism used to connect learning institutions and government agencies, the Internet has expanded to include graphics, sound and video. Its manifold commercial applications have not been lost on a range of businesses and other types of organizations worldwide that are actively using the Internet to achieve organizational goals. Perhaps most important, this "network of networks'" and its World Wide Web do not distinguish between "consumers" and "producers" of content (Adler, 1994, p. xxi).

The implications of such a medium are profound, with its applications not only enriching personal lives but having diverse business applications, not the least of which is public relations and especially public relations community-building.

Rutkowski (1997) observes:

> Any kind of logical architecture can be instantaneously deployed, which, at the extreme, could allow anyone to globally broadcast video, audio, or text material. In this way, old concepts of fixed communication sectors such as public broadcast, common carrier, and private telecommunications service are blended in ways that are almost impossible to disentangle. This architecture provides an enormously compelling platform for all kinds of new applications and services where the network itself becomes the medium for

> development, distribution, advertisement, remuneration, and deployment. The current use of extremely fast searching engines and push technology—as well as the future use of intelligent agents—further blurs distinctions between public and private, and between broadcasting and private communications (pp. 8-9).

Rutkowski (1997) observed that, by 1996, more than 100,000 networks comprised the Internet--with more than 10 million advertised host computers attached to them. Although half of this infrastructure was in the United States, the other half was distributed among more than 100 countries, and gateways to other networks extended the capability for e-mail to nearly 180 countries. Varian (1997) contends that it is unlikely that a privatized environment would have developed the open standards and the public-spirited patterns of cooperation that have characterized the Internet, which until 1995 existed as a state-financed public utility (p. 23).

Importantly, Varian (1997) reports that a growing portion of Web traffic comes from its increasing use as a publishing medium. Magazines, newspapers, television stations, academic journals and commercial enterprises are maintaining an Internet presence (p. 30). Kahin (1997) adds that the World Wide Web is revolutionary because it is the first efficient and widely available electronic delivery system for text and images; he says its success is analogous to that of radio, broadcast, television and cable (p. 55).

CRITICISMS OF THE INTERNET

Not everyone shares this enthusiasm about the Internet, however; neither does its community-building potential earn wholesale endorsement. For example, Brook and Boal (1995) say the flight into cyberspace is a wish to leave body, time and place behind in search of an electronic emulation of community; this flight is motivated by the same fears and longings that prompted flight to the suburbs, i.e., this is another "white flight" at a time when life is uncertain, unpleasant and dangerous (p. ix). Also, Mowlana (1996) reminds us that media will never be able to create a community, although they of course play an important role as organizers, mobilizers, crystallizers and legitimizers. Rather, a community is created when people act together. However, he does note:

> The media .... perform as an educator, a source of information, an advocate for policy or ideology, and a forum in which to transmit culture. This, however, is not community building but rather helping the community come to some action, providing integration and identity, or transmitting values and facilitating communication among members. The community itself, however, preexists the media and their influence. (pp. 92-93)

By the early 20th Century, men were separated more by skill and occupation than by community, i.e., they identified themselves more by their tasks in an urban-industrial society than by their reputations in a town or a city neighborhood (Wiebe, p. xiv). Bell (1988) noted that the old primary group ties of family and local community had been shattered; ancient parochial faiths were questioned; few unifying values took their place. Most importantly, Bell says, the critical standards of an educated elite no longer shaped opinions or taste (pp. 21-22).

THE COMMUNITY-BUILDING POTENTIAL OF THE INTERNET

One must view any attempts at building "corporate tribalism" with both suspicion and skepticism. Wiebe (1967) observed that the health of the nineteenth-century community depended upon two closely related conditions: its ability to manage the lives of community members and the belief among its members that the community had these powers (p. xiii). Corporations must not manage the lives of community members, nor is it suggested that corporations seek that power.

Assuredly, corporations must not co-opt the unique role of the geographic community, the local government, the schools and other community institutions, but rather corporations should attempt to enhance such communities with themselves as integral members. Further, corporations should pursue community-building within the organization, itself, and with all of its stakeholders—including geographic community members. Through the Internet, corporations can perform much community-building among not only employees, but also among virtually all other organizational stakeholders—enhancing a sense of community, not only with the organization as locus, but within the context of the geographic community.

The recommendations of Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) provide a blueprint to doing this. Well-conceived Web pages, replete with chat rooms dedicated to both occupational and avocational interests, can create electronic linkages among individuals, communication that has been difficult or inordinately expensive to develop using other media.

Electronic bulletin boards and interactive electronic employee publications can link employees and other stakeholders in myriad creative ways. Personal employee Web pages—perhaps developed with the help of the corporate Web manager and linked to the corporate Web and even originating on the organization's server--will enhance shared personal experiences and can enrich leisure-time activities. Electronic "company picnics" will not replace "real time" three-legged sack races, but inexpensive Web connections can create infinite opportunities for consummatory, i.e., self-fulfilling, communication that offer an immediate enhancement of life.

Much can be done, not only in helping stakeholders to find security and protection through association with others, but to generate interest in community welfare, social order and progress. The Internet promises yet-to-be-considered opportunities for corporations to share aesthetic experience and to explore corporate and personal values, while absorbing the local geographic communities' traditions and spirit. Organizational and public relations audits are one means to determine existing communication needs, as well as to reconsider the traditional media that have been used and to examine what electronic communication linkages will be desirable in the future. Imaginative use of text, as well as graphic, sound and video capabilities of the Internet (and fire-walled Intranets where appropriate), together with on-site computers accessible to all employees, will not result in loss of production time if stringent policies and regulations exist regarding access times and other usage.

Anonymous electronic "suggestion boxes" and easy and anonymous means to electronically "ask the boss" the types of questions that beg anonymity are other means, not only to dispel rumors and to allow effective monitoring of public opinion, but to create the two-way symmetrical dialogue and problem-solving that create public relations excellence and organizational effectiveness.

Such applications are virtually free for organizations already having Internet and World Wide Web capabilities. Restrictions and limitations exist only in the lack of imaginations of public relations practitioners who have not yet fully realized the potential of an exciting new means of communication that can help enhance community-building in the 21st Century. However, leadership also must come from the academy, i.e., among public relations educators/scholars who likewise can understand not only the potential technological applications of the Internet and its World Wide Web, but who are highly familiar with the theoretical perspectives needed to examine the impact and effect of such communication.

The Internet and the World Wide Web will not only figure prominently in public relations and public relations community-building in the 21st Century, it most likely will dominate in these efforts. It behooves public relations educators to prepare for their role in teaching students and practitioners how to best use this medium to enhance public relations community-building.

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